AN

EXAMINATION

OF THE

LEADING PRINCIPLE

OF

THE NEW SYSTEM OF MORALS,

AS THAT PRINCIPLE IS STATED

AND APPLIED IN

Mr. GODWIN's ENQUIRY

CONCERNING

POLITICAL JUSTICE,

IN A LETTER TO A FRIEND.

The boundaries that have hitherto ſerved to divide Virtue and Vice, are gone. The true intereſts of mankind require, not their removal but their confirmation.

Political Juſtice, Book 4, C. 3, 4to Edit.

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ADVERTISEMENT.

MY ſole wiſh in publiſhing the following Letter, is to expoſe in its elements, and while yet it may avail, a Syſtem of Ethics which has long, in its principle at leaſt, been ſtealing into favour; and which, in its certain tendency to undermine the foundation of whatever is excellent and valuable in the human heart, is exactly adapted to qualify us for either of the two deſcriptions of character which form the ſhame and ſcourge of the age—for the unprincipled and obſequious tools of political corruption, on the one hand; or the vain and deſperate votaries of political empiriciſm, on the other.

Had I met with any thing to the ſame purpoſe in the publications of the day, I ſhould gladly have ſuppreſſed a ſlight and imperfect Eſſay, which will be far from diſappointing my intentions, ſhould it only provoke a more full and ſatisfactory diſcuſſion of the ſubject from any other quarter.

IPSWICH,
February 10, 1798.

ERRATUM. P. 31, line 13, for *diſtinction*, read *deſtination*.

AN

An EXAMINATION, &c.

I Think, my dear Friend, it was at our laſt meeting in town, that the converſation turned on what we called, for want of a better title, The NEW SYSTEM OF MORALS. In our opinion of the real temper and character of this Syſtem, and of its ſure effects on the whole ſcheme of human life and manners, we were perfectly agreed; but we wanted leiſure to trace its origin and ſift its pretenſions with that accuracy, and to that extent, which, in my eagerneſs on the occaſion, I could very anxiouſly have deſired.

As a curious, becauſe an idle obſerver of what is paſſing in the world, this Syſtem, you know, has long attracted my attention; and unleſs I am deluded, beyond all cure from reaſon and reflection, it affords a ſubject for very ſerious meditation. Our condition is no longer to be diſſembled: It has long

been creeping upon us in ſilence and obſcurity; it ſhould ſeem, from various prognoſtics, to have very nearly touched its criſis; and ſtands without any of that ſort of parallel in former times, which will enable us to form a conjecture of its iſſue. Amidſt a ſteady, radical, confirmed decay, approaching, from every ſymptom, to a total breaking up, of that religion, and, together with the religion, of that peculiar caſt of morals and of manners, which gave its diſtinguiſhing character to modern Europe; combined with a diſſemination of knowledge through all claſſes, unexampled in the hiſtory of man, quickening the whole maſs into a new activity, and inſpiring, as new attainments ever will, a ſelf-confidence and impatient diſdain of all control upon the ſovereignty of reaſon—ariſes a Syſtem exactly accommodated to this eventful change; profeſſing an excluſive right to direct the whole of human conduct; at war, in its eſſence, with every other corrective; and placing its own efficacy ſolely in the free and enlightened ſpeculations of each individual on the general welfare.

The portentous aſpect of this Syſtem, and the conjuncture in which it has appeared, are not more remarkable than the incidental circum-

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ſtances by which its progreſs has been favoured. Its vital principle—the principle which gives being and force to all its doctrines in all their extent—has never been regarded as peculiar to itſelf, nor examined in the ſpirit which ſuch a view of it would naturally have excited: it has crept, on the contrary, unobſerved, into general favour; it ſtands avowed and accredited as a certain truth, by all the leading authorities of the day; and has formed as ſecure a lodgment in the public mind, as the moſt ſanguine votary of this Syſtem could deſire. The conſequences reſulting from this principle, and compoſing what I ſhall take the liberty of calling the Syſtem itſelf, have not been brought before the public all at once and in full body and array; they have ſtolen ſucceſſively upon us, in different groups, from different quarters, under various diſguiſes, and in all the diverſities of form, from the ſubtle and ſpecious inſinuation at which the ſcrupulous might ſtartle without diſtinctly knowing what to condemn, to the bold and unqualified concluſion at which the moſt adventurous ſpirit might be ſtaggered. It has been impoſſible to bring this Proteus to any ſort of reckoning: if it was defeated in one ſhape, it ſtarted up in another; if you grappled with it this moment, in the terrific

guiſe

guiſe of defiance, it won upon you the next, in all the blandiſhments of affection, or diſarmed your reſentment with the lamentations of diſtreſs. The moſt zealous advocates of this Syſtem, have never been diſtinctly agreed on what they were proceeding or what they would be at. Some have embraced more of the ſcheme, ſome leſs; ſome have attacked one obſtacle, ſome another; in one way or other, however, their induſtry has been perfectly unwearied; it has been animated by the ſame ſpirit, it has tended to the ſame iſſue, and has had all the *effect*, at leaſt, of correſpondence. Their courtſhip has been of a kind the moſt difficult to reſiſt. They have taken their ſtand on motives the moſt honourable to themſelves, and the moſt ſeductive to their auditors—the good of human kind and an anxiety to reform the principles and inſtitutions on which its happineſs depends: they have addreſſed themſelves to the moſt generous and to the moſt flattering of the paſſions—to our love of truth, of independence, and liberal enquiry; to our abhorrence of craft, impoſition, and ſervile prejudice: no vehicle of zeal has been neglected: the ſolemnity of narrative, the ſubtlety of diſquiſition, the charms of poetry, and the deluſions of romance, have all been preſſed into the ſervice; and criticiſm has been

been perplexed by the various modes in which the aſſault has been conducted, the purity of the motives on which it has been urged, and the indiſtinct diſcloſure of what it was propoſed to ſubſtitute in the yawning void of what it was ſo anxiouſly laboured to deſtroy.

Under theſe circumſtances, I have always conſidered the appearance of Mr. Godwin's Political Juſtice, as an event the moſt deſirable that could have happened. With all its apparent novelty of argument and raſhneſs of concluſion, his work is in truth and ſubſtance nothing more than a complete digeſt of the New Syſtem of Morals, reduced to its firſt elements, drawn out in its true form, and applied to a ſubject of all others the beſt adapted to diſplay its genuine character and temper. The leading principle which he profeſſes through his whole Enquiry, is preciſely that which has animated and guided all his predeceſſors: this principle he has diſtinctly ſtated and avowed: and by purſuing it, not in the perverſe ſpirit of a ſatiriſt, but with the honeſt zeal of a true votary, to its extreme and revolting conſequences, he has taught the moſt inconſiderate to ponder a little, on what grounds they were acting, and in what project they were engaged. Former

mer writers in the ſame cauſe have been ſhort-ſighted, or timid, or reſerved: Mr. Godwin labours under none of theſe defects: what he has deliberately adopted, he has dared ſagaciouſly to follow; and what he has dared to follow, he has had the ſpirit to avow: we are indebted to that ſpirit; it has granted us all we wanted; it has fulfilled the prayer of Ajax; and if we are doomed to ſink under this miſchief, we ſhall at leaſt have the ſatisfaction not to periſh in the dark.

In entreating your attention, then, to the fundamental principle of Mr. Godwin's Syſtem, you will do me the juſtice to believe, that it is only in this view of it, and conſidered as the baſis of the New Syſtem of Morals, that I eſteem it at all deſerving your regard. If I am miſtaken in this opinion, I have of courſe engaged in a very idle Enquiry; if I am right, (and no man is better qualified to determine this queſtion than yourſelf,) I know you too well to ſuppoſe that you will be deterred by the apparent barrenneſs of the topic, or the neglect in which it has been ſuffered to reſt, from giving it your very ſerious conſideration.

Let us attend therefore, to Mr. Godwin's Scheme of Morals, as he has ventured very luminouſly

nouſly to expoſe it, in the courſe of his Political Enquiry.

This Syſtem opens with a radical poſition, That we are bound in *juſtice* to do all the good we can; and that all moral duty therefore is compriſed in Juſtice. It is juſt to do all the good we can; it is unjuſt not to do all the good we can. Being bound in juſtice to do all the good we poſſibly can, the only juſt motive for preferring either our own good to that of others, or, of other perſons, the good of any one individual to that of any other, muſt be a ſenſe of the ſuperior quantity of good which that individual, whether it be ourſelves or another, is capable of producing; becauſe, by purſuing this plan only, can we produce all the poſſible good in our power: whatever therefore leads us to prefer either ourſelves or others upon a different account, is immoral and unjuſt. To execute this grand deſign of producing all the good in our power, by ourſelves or through others, we muſt be perfectly free from reſtraint, too, as well as bias; all promiſes, oaths, contracts, &c.—whatever blindly determines us to act in any definite way—ſhould not be allowed therefore, or not regarded: if they do *not* lead

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us to deviate from the only right line of conduct—that of producing all the good poſſible—they are uſeleſs; if they do, they are immoral and unjuſt. Beſides a freedom from reſtraint and bias, a knowledge of truth, alſo, is neceſſary to enable us to be juſt: truth therefore ſhould at all times and under all circumſtances be ſpoken; and ſecreſy, prudential reſerve, delicate concealment, &c. ſhould have no place in the world. The moral as well as phyſical order of things being equally governed by neceſſity, virtue can be approved only on the ſame principle that we approve a fertile vale; and vice diſapproved, as we diſapprove an infectious diſtemper; as the cauſe of good, and as the cauſe of evil: rewards and puniſhments muſt be regarded only as a means, and that an irrational one, of reforming error, which can be effectually cured only by an infuſion of truth: and reſentment, remorſe, and affliction for paſt events, muſt be extinguiſhed from the face of the earth. In fine, the truly wiſe and juſt man, will be actuated neither by intereſt nor ambition, the love of honour, the deſire of fame, nor emulation; the good of the whole, will be his only object; this good he will inceſſantly purſue, and the purſuit of it will

conſtitute

conſtitute his happineſs,—a happineſs, which nothing but bodily pain, and ſcarcely that, can diſturb. *

Nothing, you ſee, can be more thoroughly conſiſtent. Allow the firſt poſition, (and it has every prepoſſeſſion in its favour,) and all the inferences follow ſo clearly and irreſiſtibly, that it ſeems impoſſible to elude their force, however ſubverſive they may be of the principles which have hitherto governed the conduct of mankind.

If we are bound in Juſtice to do all the good in our power, to produce the greateſt ſum of happineſs in ſentient nature, which it is within the compaſs of our faculties to effect—Then, doubtleſs, Juſtice being altogether an inflexible duty, admitting no diſpenſation, no remiſſion, no, not for a moment, our whole mind muſt be ſolely directed to this ſingle purpoſe; and the deſire to effect it, muſt conſtitute the only legitimate motive of human action. Then whatever leads us to act upon any other incitement, or with any other view, muſt be extirpated or ſubdued, as revolting againſt the rules of Juſtice. Then

* See Pol. Jus. 4to. Edit. paſſim; and particularly B. 2, c. 2, and 6; B. 3, c. 2; B. 4, c. 4, 5, 6; B. 6, c. 5; B. 7, and B. 8.

every paſſion and emotion of the human heart muſt be extinguiſhed as abhorrent to our duty; it being in the eſſence of all affections of this kind to prompt us to act upon particular motives, ſometimes not apparently conducive to the general good, and never certainly grounded upon it. Then patriotiſm, friendſhip, gratitude, affection, pity, all the public and private virtues, all the ſocial and domeſtic charities, which have hitherto been conſidered as the beſt bleſſings and ſureſt hope, as well as the grace and ornament of our nature, muſt be effectually rooted from our feelings, as creating an unjuſt preference in favour of certain individuals, or deſcriptions of individuals, independently of their diſpoſition and their power to co-operate with us in promoting the general good. Then whatever obſtructs us in the purſuit of this good, is an abateable nuiſance. All determinate rules are blind reſtrictions. All legal property is inveterate injuſtice: I have a right to juſt as much as I conceive will beſt enable me to accompliſh my grand project; and nobody has a right to any other portion, upon any other title. All law is uſurpation upon reaſon: all judicial proceſs, fetters and oppreſſion: prevailing ſentiments and manners, antiquated prejudice.—If we accept

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the principle, we muſt take the conſequences—they are potentially included.

It is to this rigid dependence (though we might have expected a very different effect from it) that we muſt aſcribe the total want of any thing like a deciſive refutation, or even maſterly review, of a Syſtem which has certainly excited ſome curioſity. Thoſe who have engaged in this taſk, though otherwiſe fully equal to it, have not given themſelves patience to unravel the web in which they were entangled. They were embarraſſed. From poſitions too obvious for examination, they had been gradually led on to concluſions at which human reaſon revolts: repelled from the extremities, they ſlowly meaſured back their ſteps to the original principle—all was ſound, all was water-tight; not a cranny, not a chink, for truth to ſlip out, or error to creep in; till, in deſpair of tracing the leak, they injudiciouſly endeavoured at a compromiſe; they approved the Syſtem in part, they condemned it in part: the root was ſound, the branches vigorous, the foliage fair, but the fruit—was the apple of Sodom.

——"Bitter aſhes; which th' offended taſte"
"With ſpattering noiſe rejected."

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That Syſtem will not be ſo treated. Without chewing theſe cinders, nothing can be clearer than that the whole ſcheme is of a piece, one and indiviſible; and that as one and indiviſible, it muſt be admitted or rejected. If the fundamental principle be true, if it be true that morality conſiſts in producing all the good we can, I admit that all the conſequences are clear, concatenated, and of irreſiſtible conviction. Arachne never wove a juſter web. If the fundamental principle be falſe, the whole is falſe; and the farther we advance, the more we are bewildered.

On what grounds is it ſo confidently aſſumed and implicitly admitted, that we are bound as moral agents to act on the principle of producing all the good in our power?

It cannot, I am ſure, eſcape you, that what gives force to this principle, and, through this principle, as I conceive, to the whole body of the New Syſtem of Morals, is the opinion which has lately prevailed, that virtue conſiſts altogether in utility—that it is the beneficial or pernicious tendency of any action, which alone conſtitutes it virtuous or vicious. If virtue is indeed only another name for the utility of an action, I am bound

bound to look to utility, and to utility only, as a teſt of moral rectitude; and, ſetting aſide every other conſideration, to act, as I mean to be virtuous, on the ſole principle of producing all the good in my power, I cannot refuſe myſelf to this conſequence.

I have ſtated this notion of virtue, though now ſo familiar, as of late introduction. It certainly is ſo. The cauſe of moral diſtinction, as a curious and important phænomenon, has of courſe at all times exerciſed the enquiries of the reflecting part of mankind: till within the preſent century I am pretty confident it has never been aſcribed to this proſpective view of its tendency. Of the antient moraliſts I certainly do not recollect one, who has accounted for it in this way. The object of theſe teachers, indeed, was not morality merely, in the confined ſenſe in which we uſe that term, but the art of living happily: as conducive to a happy life, however, the doctrine of morals could not well be neglected; and it was accordingly inculcated by all, from Epicurus who regarded it as auxiliary to what he perverſely called pleaſure, to Zeno, who exalted it into the ſupreme and ultimate good itſelf: the occaſion was certainly fair for reſolving virtue into utility;

yet

yet ſo far were they from regarding it in that light, that amongſt the various topics which they urged, and with ſuch diverſified addreſs, to intereſt the human heart in its favour, its ultimate ſubſervience to the general advantage, is but faintly to be recognized. If we deſcend to the later moraliſts, who have indulged much more freely in ſpeculations than their predeceſſors, the beneficial tendency of virtue was by no means the firſt of its properties which engroſſed attention: its agreement with the law of nature, its congeniality to the perceptions of a moral taſte, its conformity to certain eternal and immutable relations and differences of things, its correſpondence with truth—as I need not quote the earlier Publiciſts, nor Lord Shafteſbury, nor Dr. Clarke, nor Mr. Wollaſton, to prove—were, all of them, characteriſtics, real or imaginary, which had previouſly been ſuggeſted and adopted.

Utility, though not the firſt quality of virtue which engroſſed attention, ſeems however, when once fairly brought forward, to have been of all others the beſt adapted to intereſt and ſecure it. It was a property of virtue not to be diſputed; it gave, or ſeemed to give, a very clear and preciſe account of a diſtinction previouſly obſcure; and

and it furniſhed an argument in its favour, which, if not the moſt powerful in its recommendation, was at leaſt the moſt unanſwerable in its defence: perhaps, too, the faſhion which prevailed ſo remarkably, early in this century, of tracing the goodneſs of the Creator to his creatures through all the works of nature, by prediſpoſing the mind to regard with eagerneſs the ſubſervience of any principle to the grand deſign ſo conſpicuouſly carrying on in the Syſtem around us, might ſtill farther conſpire to recommend it:—at any rate, it was no ſooner ſtarted than confeſſed, That virtue conſiſts in that modification of thought and action which tends to promote the general happineſs, and vice in its oppoſite.

Hume propoſed this Syſtem in his Moral Eſſays with his uſual addreſs. Virtue he reſolved into perſonal merit; and perſonal merit, according to Mr. Hume, conſiſts ſolely in the poſſeſſion of mental qualities, uſeful or agreeable to ourſelves or to others. Nothing, he obſerves, can furniſh juſt ground for moral diſtinction in any quality or action, but its beneficial or pernicious tendency: reaſon informs us what theſe tendencies are; and a ſentiment of humanity implanted in our nature, a fellow feeling for the happi-

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neſs or miſery of mankind, produces our moral approbation or our blame, as any quality or action has the one tendency or the other.

No hypotheſis was ever more ſucceſsful: it prevailed without a ſtruggle; and was purſued to preciſely the ſame conſequences by the illuminated philoſophers of France and the moſt orthodox divines of England, men as little diſpoſed to agree in any ſpeculation as can well be imagined. The train of thought was probably the ſame in the minds of both theſe parties. If it is the tendency of any action to good or ill which conſtitutes it virtuous or vicious, then this tendency is the ſpring-head, ſo long concealed, of moral truth and the univerſal ſolvent to which we muſt reſort in all moral enquiry. By this tendency we muſt determine the exiſtence and the meaſure of virtue and vice, of right and wrong: on this tendency we muſt found the moral approbation and the blame we attach to theſe qualities: from this tendency we muſt deduce the ſole moral obligations we are under to obſerve them. The only true ground of moral diſtinction, muſt form the only juſt ground of moral ſentiment.

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The ſame concluſion was formed by the atheiſtic philoſophers and the Chriſtian divines, but of courſe it was differently applied. By the former it was employed to explode the received diſtinctions of right and wrong, as the offspring of prejudice and error, and to conſtruct an improved code of morals on the ſimple principle of utility: by the latter it was adopted to give a rational account of theſe diſtinctions and to impreſs a juſter ſenſe of their importance. The works of Helvetius will afford an able ſpecimen of the firſt of theſe deſigns; and I ſhall juſt advert to Mr. Brown and Mr. Paley, the firſt as the original mover, and the latter as the very popular expounder, in this country, of the other.

Mr. Brown publiſhed his Eſſays on the Characteriſtics, a book of conſiderable celebrity in its day, ſoon after the firſt appearance of Mr. Hume's Moral Eſſays; which, as he quotes, we muſt preſume he had read; and to which, there is little doubt, he was indebted for the leading feature of his Syſtem. The profeſſed object of theſe Eſſays on the Characteriſtics was to expoſe the falſe philoſophy of Lord Shafteſbury: but in encountering the moral part of this philoſophy, the author was naturally led by the importance of

his ſubject to go farther ; to enter fully into the merits of the queſtion ; and for the purpoſe of detecting the futility, not only of his Lordſhip's ſcheme, but of moſt of the popular hypotheſes of the day, to inveſtigate himſelf the true grounds of moral diſtinction. This part of his work (it is the ſecond of his three Eſſays) is evidently laboured with peculiar care, and not unſucceſsfully. He ſhews with conſiderable ſkill, that the received definitions of virtue are vague, inadequate and untenable : that the actions which have been denominated by former moraliſts beautiful, fit, or true, ſhine only by reflected light : that it is not their beauty, their fitneſs, or their truth, but *their tendency to produce happineſs*, which gives them their moral luſtre ; and concludes accordingly, " That virtue can conſiſt in nothing but " the voluntary production of the greateſt ge- " neral happineſs," and, " That our perſonal hap- " pineſs muſt form the only obligation to its " practice." Brown ſaw clearly enough that the motive he had aſſigned for the production of virtue, was, in his view of it, totally unequal to that effect. It was in his contemplation that it ſhould be ſo ; it was eſſential to his ſcheme to weave " *dignus vindice nodus*," and, on the acknowledged inſufficiency of all earthly motives,

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to ſubſtantiate the neceſſity of "a lively and ac-
"tive belief in an all-ſeeing and all-powerful God,
"who will hereafter make men happy or miſera-
"ble, as they deſignedly promote or violate the
"happineſs of others," which he denominates "the
"Eſſence of Religion" and maintains to be alone
competent to produce "That entire and univer-
"ſal coincidence between private and public hap-
"pineſs" in which he places the perfect eſtabliſh-
ment of virtue.

His Syſtem, thus compleated, forms the ground work of Mr. Paley's celebrated "Principles of "Moral and Political Philoſophy," in which vir tue is defined, as a fundamental principle, "The "doing good to mankind, in obedience to the "will of God, and for the ſake of everlaſting hap-"pineſs." The two Syſtems are, indeed, ſubſtantially the ſame: and in one reſpect the original has, I think, the advantage in correct ſtatement, ſince "obedience to the will of God" and "a "view of everlaſting happineſs," are, in the ſtrict conſtruction of Mr. Paley's definition, eſſential ingredients in the compoſition of virtue, while they are more properly conſidered by Mr. Brown as extrinſic motives, eſſential only to enforce its obſervance. As nothing material, however, turns upon

on this difference, the objections it might give riſe to (for it is certainly expoſed to objections) have never occurred or never been ſtarted. "The will "of God concerning any action," Mr. Paley proceeds to obſerve, "where it is not expreſſly re-"vealed, can only be collected by enquiring into "the tendency of ſuch action to promote or di-"miniſh the general happineſs"—"by this ten-"dency we are to appretiate the quality of all "actions, as virtuous or vicious"—"whatever is "expedient, is right"—and, "it is the utility of "any moral rule which alone conſtitutes the ob-"ligations of it."* His whole ſcheme of ethics is deduced from this principle.

The ſoundeſt advocates of Chriſtianity, you ſee, on this ſide the water, ſeem juſt as earneſt in the propagation of this doctrine, as the moſt determined Atheiſts on the other; till, between the two, no other notion of virtue is left, of any prevalence, in the civilized world.

Is it poſſible, my dear Friend, that it can require much profound thought, or many words, to refute a principle, which, but for its general reception

* See Mor. and Pol. Phi. B. 1, c. 7, and B. 2, c. 6.

ception (a powerful claim to reverence no doubt) would ſcarcely deſerve a ſerious examination?

What does this axiom aſſume? It takes for granted, that becauſe the end of virtue is the general good, (as it is undoubtedly, and of every other principle moulded into the compoſition of phyſical and moral nature) that it is its tendency to this end, which determines us to diſtinguiſh it as virtue; that becauſe the final cauſe of moral diſtinction is utility, that utility muſt be its proximate cauſe alſo;—an aſſumption, which, without any ſort of internal evidence in its favour, is directly controverted by the very proof which we ſhould naturally expect to find adduced in its ſupport—the preſumptions, I mean, and ſometimes very ſtrong ones, which may be drawn from analogy. We are actuated to various ends by various principles; by more perhaps than a ſuperficial obſerver will ſuppoſe or allow. After a pretty careful review of this ſubject—it is one of the moſt curious and inſtructive in the circle of contemplative enquiry—I may venture to affirm that there is no ſingle inſtance, no, not the minuteſt, in the whole moral œconomy of man, in which the end to be attained, is, as this axiom preſumes, the motive appointed to attain it.

it. Let us take the moſt familiar caſes that can occur. The end of eating and drinking is the ſupport of our bodies; do we eat and drink for that purpoſe? The end of the union of the ſexes is the propagation of the ſpecies; do we unite with that view? The end of parental affection is the preſervation of helpleſs infancy; do we love our children on that account? The ultimate end here, too, is the general good; does it form any part of the incitement? In dealing with each other, we wiſely copy nature, and never dream of attaining any end through the agency of others, by kindling in thoſe agents an immediate paſſion for that end. The end of civil government is the maintenance of ſocial intercourſe with all the advantages which have ſprung from human ſociety, and the functions of its moſt ſubordinate miniſters are eſſential to its ſupport: Did the moſt viſionary enthuſiaſt ever preſume, that all the tipſtaves and catchpoles in the State ſhould be prompted to their duty by a zeal for the great objects which they no doubt contribute to promote? It is not to *important* ends only that we are ſtimulated in this way, by immediate motives entirely diſtinct from the deſire to attain them; we are often affected in the ſame manner where the propoſed end of that affection

fection is either not diſcoverable, or if diſcoverable, appears comparatively trivial, as might be inſtanced in our love of harmony, of uniformity, of order, and of beauty out of our own ſpecies: Would it not be a little extraordinary, that purpoſes of ſuch high moment as thoſe which reſult from moral diſtinction—purpoſes too in many caſes exceedingly remote, ſhould be abandoned to the proviſions of a forecaſt, to anticipations of ultimate utility, to which no one purpoſe beſides in the whole human œconomy has been entruſted?

But what avails analogy, when the thing is refuted as a fact by the univerſal ſenſe of mankind? If it is the utility of an action which conſtitutes it virtuous, we muſt all be conſcious of it. It is perfectly impoſſible that we ſhould be miſtaken in our feelings, however we may be miſled in our reaſonings about them. Turn then to the writers who ſpeak the language of nature and truth, the poets and orators of all ages. Are the virtues they celebrate ever aſcribed to this motive, are they ever exalted in this view, are they ever recommended on this principle? Nothing leſs. Look into the hiſtorians: they expreſs exactly the ſame ſentiments. The deaths of Socrates and Seneca were worthy of their lives;

lives; and ſhed, beyond all queſtion, a ray of intereſt over their courſe, which the higheſt noon of their aſcendant never equalled: What apparent connection is there between the unſhaken fortitude and philoſophic calmneſs which overpower us with awful admiration in the dying moments of theſe great teachers of morality, and the general happineſs of mankind? In actions which affect this happineſs much more directly, their tendency to promote it, ſeems to conſtitute no ingredient in the motive of the agent, or the approbation of the ſpectator. Hiſtory and tradition teem with the applauſes of thoſe heroes who have devoted every thing dear to life, and life itſelf, for the ſalvation of their country. The ſpirit of patriotiſm, which animated theſe perſonages to ſuch high exploits, is totally diſtinct from general philanthropy, and a ſenſe of the ultimate ſubſervience of their conduct to univerſal good. A genuine patriot would eſtabliſh the proſperity of his country on the ruin of every State which obſtructs it; nor is he always remarkable for an exquiſite ſenſibility towards the perſonal and domeſtic ſufferings even of the individuals who compoſe the corporate body he eſpouſes. It is the good of the *State* which the patriot affects; its wealth, its ſtrength, its conſideration in the eyes

of

of mankind; almoſt any thing rather than the phyſical happineſs of its inhabitants, which he is ever ready to ſacrificé, with very little compunction, to the attainment of theſe objects. This happineſs, and the general happineſs, I believe to be promoted by theſe means; but theſe means are not adopted nor applauded with that view. In ſurveying the atchievements of a Leonidas, or Regulus, or Cato, it is not the effects, it is the motives, of their conduct which expand us with rapture—what intereſt have *we* in the fortunes of unknown multitudes in Rome or Sparta, who might chance to derive a benefit from their exploits?—No, it is the command and greatneſs of ſoul which fortified theſe immortal patriots to make ſuch mighty ſacrifices in a common cauſe, that extorts our admiration, and will enſure it to their memory, while the world endures. If we looked to the utility of actions as a teſt of their merit, the inventor of the common wind-mill would eclipſe in ſplendour all the worthies of antiquity—in the durability and diffuſion of his beneficence, there is no ſort of compariſon between them; and he is buried, if that circumſtance were of force to exalt utility into virtue, in a reaſonable depth of years. But ſo far are we from eſtimating virtue

on this principle, that if a man could bring himſelf, by any effort, to perform any one of the virtues with this view, to diſcharge, for example, very punctually, all the duties of gratitude and humanity, without any of the ordinary motives to ſuch actions, without any kind of grateful emotion or fellow feeling, but purely from a conviction of the ultimate tendency of ſuch conduct to promote the general good—I put it home to your breaſt, and that of every man living—notwithſtanding all we might affect to ſay or endeavour to think, and though he might be actuated (with Mr. Paley) by the proſpect of everlaſting happineſs into the bargain, he would be an object to us rather of diſguſt and averſion. Like the ſtarch and ſpiritleſs efforts of what ſchool-boys term *painting* in penmanſhip, his character would want all that charm of freedom, grace and vigour, which the original energies of nature can alone inſpire.

There is no eſcaping from this teſt. If it is contended that we indeed approve of virtue on other grounds, but that it conſiſts in utility, the whole queſtion is ſurrendered. Virtue can be nothing but what affects us as virtue; and, which, as affecting us in that particular way, mankind have

have agreed to denominate by that particular title. If we are ſpeaking of any thing elſe we ſhould adopt another name. All that ſuch a diſtinction can poſſibly mean therefore is this, that the reſult of what affects us as virtue is the general utility, but that it affects us as virtue on a different account; that the appointed end of moral diſtinction is the general good, but that its efficient cauſe is ſomething totally diſtinct from all conſideration of that effect. I contend for nothing more. All I charge upon the Syſtem which derives virtue from utility, is the ſubſtituting this effect for that cauſe; the ultimate diſtinction for the proximate motive; and thus treating morality as an academician of Lagado * might be ſuppoſed to deal with the common functions of life, who rejecting the calls of appetite as brute inſtincts, ſhould recommend us in his project to eat and drink and ſleep, not from the vulgar motives of hunger, thirſt, or drowſineſs, but comformably to our reſearches into the intended effect of theſe operations on the animal œconomy.

Let

* See a Viſit to this Academy, Gulliver's Travels, Voyage to Laputa, c. 5.

Let the real cauſe of our moral ſentiments be what it may (we ſhall recur to this cauſe hereafter) the reſult of ſuch an inverted proceſs, whether aſſumed as a fact, or advanced as a ſpeculation, can be nothing but error and deluſion. We meet, in truth, with nothing elſe. All the prepoſterous, all the revolting, all the laughable, conſequences, which a Swift would have exhibited in grave detail to reflect eternal deriſion on the ſource from whence they came, are formally deduced by Mr. Godwin as wonderful diſcoveries imbibed from this precious ſpring of all moral and political truth.

It would be too much to aſk you to purſue theſe wanderers from the high road of nature through all the mazes of their error; but it may be worth while to remark the principal difficulties by which they are beſet, and the Serbonian bog on which they open.

Virtue, then, we will ſay, conſiſts in utility; and aſpiring to be virtuous, to my means, I am bound to be as uſeful as I can,—I am bound to produce all the good in my power. This injunction has a very impoſing air undoubtedly, but

where

where does it leave us? As huſband, father of a family, friend, member of ſociety, in theſe, or in any ſtation or condition of life, what ſort of direction does it afford me? To the perſpicacious and preſcient eye which could ſurvey at a glance all the modes of beneficence in which it is poſſible to act, and purſue the reſult of ſuch actions to the remoteſt ramifications of their conſequences, the path of duty under ſuch a precept might be viſible, I admit; but what track could be diſcovered in this boundleſs expanſe by the confined views and dim foreſight of man? I muſt ſpend all my life, according to this ſcheme, in ſpeculation, before I could ſafely take the firſt ſtep. I muſt conſume years in determining, according to the multiplicity and complication of exiſting circumſtances, *that* to be right, which a change in thoſe circumſtances, the moment after, might render totally wrong. The rule is a moſt incomparable rule, but it is impoſſible to put it into practice. This "palpable obſcure" this "reign of Chaos and old night" thus ſpread over the whole plan and conduct of life, is however not without its uſe. It leaves us entirely open to the direction of any projector. All is darkneſs; and he is at liberty to guide us by any lights he can furniſh.

I am

I am bound to produce all the good in my power—but by what incitements is it propoſed to ſtimulate me in this arduous duty? The general good, I will allow, is an object highly deſireable; and though ſtripped of all that can impart a lively intereſt to it, of time and place and perſon and circumſtance, there is no man, I wiſh to believe, ſo ſtrangely malevolent, who would not give it, when fairly brought before him in a moment of eaſe and reflection, his heartieſt good wiſhes, or even concur in any reaſonable plan to promote it. All this I readily admit: but to convert this remote regard into the primary principle of all action, is quite a different affair. Such a ſcheme muſt neceſſarily be deluſive, becauſe it controverts, at its outſet, the ſtrongeſt inſtincts of our nature; becauſe it is at war with what neither mortal ſtrength nor ſubtlety can aboliſh or ſupplant; and grounds its ſucceſs on the extinction of powers which fanaticiſm may counteract, indeed, but never can extirpate. We cannot change our nature. By a law of that nature we proceed from perſonal affection to general regard: from the love of offſpring, of kindred, of neighbours, and acquaintance, to that of our diſtrict, our community, our country, and our kind. In this order our affections are diffuſed;

fuſed; and in this order, by the conſtitution of our being, they weaken as they ſpread.

"God loves from whole to parts: but human ſoul
"Muſt riſe from individual to the whole.
"Self love but ſerves the virtuous mind to wake,
"As the ſmall pebble ſtirs the peaceful lake;
"The centre moved, a circle ſtrait ſucceeds,
"Another ſtill, and ſtill another ſpreads;
"Friend, parent, neighbour, firſt it will embrace;
"His country next; and next all human race."

Sings Pope, as he winds up his Eſſay on Man, with the correctneſs of a philoſopher and the ſpirit of a poet. In vain we endeavour to think otherwiſe; in vain we act as if otherwiſe we thought: the original feeling remains, and cannot be ſubdued. The warmeſt philanthropiſt would eat his dinner with good appetite, though one of the Philippines, with all its inhabitants, were ſwallowed by an earthquake, or the plague were raging on the ſhores of the Helleſpont, and would weep in bittereſt affliction at the untimely death of his only child. I am not contending that this diſpoſition of things is right. It is not the place to do it. Let him who dares, arraign it. But I maintain it is the fact, and a fact which, without a violence on nature, we cannot alter.

To

To invert this natural ſeries, to transform the laſt and remoteſt extenſion of our regards into the original ſpring from which we are to derive all others,—to do more—to ſet it up as the only legitimate principle of action, ſuperſeding every other motive and every moral corrective on theſe motives, is ſheer infatuation. Let us ſee to what it leads.

I am bound to produce all the good in my power. I am bound then to act upon this principle only, to have this object perpetually before me, and to purſue it with all the faculties I poſſeſs. I am bound then to diſcard every other principle of action as immoral and unjuſt, and to extinguiſh or ſubdue, as much as in me lays, every paſſion and affection of my nature, to make way for the operation of this grand precept. I muſt not till my farm, nor marry a wife, nor rear my children, from the common motives of profit, love, or affection, but from a conviction that by ſo acting I ſhall beſt promote the general good. For how can I promote that good to the utmoſt of my power, unleſs in each particular act, at each particular moment, I do my utmoſt to promote it? And how can I be ſaid to promote it at all, unleſs I act with that deſign?

Since

Since as to any good that may caſually reſult from my conduct (and caſually it muſt reſult if I act from any other motive), I can no more be ſaid to have produced it, than I can be affirmed to have ſaved the life which my poſthumous ſon ſaved, becauſe I begot him. Morality on this ſcheme is not an occaſional alterative, but our conſtant diet. I muſt not ſtir a ſtep but from a conviction that of all the poſſible modes of action it is the one moſt conducive to the general welfare.

Mr. Paley has endeavoured to obviate theſe difficulties by ſuppoſing the eſtabliſhment of certain general rules, commanding what is right upon the whole, forbidding what upon the whole is wrong, and thus acting in a ſort of mediatorial capacity between the general expediency and particular meaſures, the general expediency determining the obligation to the general rule, and the general rule determining the morality or immorality of the particular action.* To theſe rules, it ſhould ſeem, we are in dubious caſes to reſort, while on ordinary occaſions we are left to act on the ordinary impulſes of common feeling. This may be the language of

* See Mor. and Pol. Phi. B. 2, c. 7, and 8.

good ſenſe contending with abſurdity; but it is ſurely incompatible with the firſt principle of his Syſtem. Let us look at the inſtances he cites, to prove the neceſſity of theſe rules; and to ſhow that an action which conſidered in itſelf is uſeful, and therefore right and virtuous, changes its character, and aſſumes the quality of vice, merely becauſe it violates them. I diſpatch a powerful oppreſſor, or rob a miſer, and give his money to the needy—have I acted right? No: ſays Mr. Paley: the act conſidered in itſelf is uſeful; but it violates a general rule againſt murder and robbery: murder and robbery have not always the ſame excuſes: now you cannot permit one action and forbid another without ſhewing a difference between them.* A difference! But I ſhew the greateſt difference poſſible: my action was confeſſedly uſeful—therefore right; thoſe to which you refer it, confeſſedly pernicious—therefore wrong. Can there be a greater difference? If another man does wrong, am I to be debarred the privilege of doing right, becauſe, forſooth, the two caſes chance to have ſome phyſical, irrelevant reſemblance, and you are ſo dull and undiſtinguiſhing that you cannot draw a line between them? Is nothing to be done

* See Mor. and Pol. Phi. B. 2, c. 7, and 8.

done that ingenious malice may imitate to ill? Is charity to be nipped becauſe the ſeducer may corrupt: is public ſpirit to be quelled becauſe the demagogue affects it: and virtue, from the awful corrector, to be degraded into the timid ſervitor of vice? Who are you, to ſtint the exerciſe of my diffuſive benevolence by your general rules? The deed which I committed, I was bound by general expediency to perform, before your rules had being: thoſe rules are arbitrary: they are, from your own account of them, the creatures of expediency: do you pretend to deduce from general expediency inferior orders to forbid that which general expediency itſelf, and at firſt hand, enjoins me to accompliſh? I admit that your general rules, crude and undiſtinguiſhing as they are, would be better than no rules at all if no other guide exiſted: but I have the teſt by which thoſe rules are triable, and on whoſe judgment they muſt ſtand or fall: give me rules conforming to this teſt, rules which declare what on all occaſions and under all circumſtances it is right to do or to abſtain from doing—give me theſe or give me none. It would be impoſſible I think to anſwer ſuch ſophiſtry on its own grounds; and—but that I wiſh to ſpare both you and myſelf the diſguſtful taſk of mooting

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ſuch deteſtable caſes—nothing would be eaſier than to ſhow that no ſuch rules could poſſibly be framed, ſince there is no deed, no, not the moſt atrocious and revolting, which a cool head, thoroughly diveſted of all feeling, might not conſider as highly expedient, under certain circumſtances, to the general good. The antipathy to all rules is certainly in the principle of the New Syſtem of Morals; and thoſe who puſh this principle to its full extent, are perfectly conſiſtent.

Then what muſt be the effect of this Syſtem on the human character and on all the means ſuggeſted by nature and matured by art, to correct, to cultivate, and to adorn it. Without furniſhing any diſcoverable plan of action, without enjoining any practicable duty, without propoſing any natural incentive, it proſcribes in one ſweeping anathema, as the vile ſpawn of inveterate prejudice and antiquated error, all the principles, maxims, and inſtitutions, moral, civil or ſocial, which have hitherto ſerved to regulate the Syſtem of human life and manners. I will ſuppoſe the regulations under each of theſe heads to be in no one inſtance the beſt that could be framed, that in ſome caſes they are defective, that in ſome they are redundant, that in

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ſome they are abſurd; at the very worſt they are better than no rules at all; they at leaſt put me on my guard; they afford me ſomething to lay my account with, in my intercourſe with others. It is looked upon as diſcreditable to evade the payment of a juſt debt, as infamous to betray a confidential ſecret, and as profligate to ſeduce a wife or a daughter; and relying on my friend's regard for his character, I aſſiſt him, with my purſe, I open family affairs to him, and give him the free range of my houſe. With a diſciple of Mr. Godwin I muſt be mad to do it. Some unruly inſtinct or paſſion, it would not be abſolutely incredulous to ſuppoſe, might ſtill remain lurking in his compoſition, in ſpite of the regenerative principles of Juſtice; and, at any rate, he might very conſiſtently with thoſe principles, and through a very conſcientious obſervance of them, defraud me of my money, divulge my boſom ſecrets to the world, and violate, according to his taſte, my partner or my child: with the money he may aſſiſt a brother philoſopher, with the ſecret he may benefit my neighbour, and by ſnapping aſunder the cords of conjugal connection, or abbreviating unproductive chaſtity, he may rationally hope to accelerate that happy intercommunity which conſtitutes one of the favour-

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ite characters of his philoſophical millenium. What ſecurity have I, that he may not act in any of theſe ways? To me, at leaſt, his conduct is abſolutely capricious. The firſt article of his creed is an utter contempt, mixed with abhorrence, for all the governing principles of life: and in this variegated and changing ſcene, where good and ill are ſo infinite in their kinds, ſo woven one into the other, and linked together in a ſucceſſion ſo inſcrutable to human foreſight, it is impoſſible to conjecture in what he may chance to place the general good, by what meaſures he may think to promote it, and through what preſent evil he may not hope to work its final conſummation. All the benefit I may derive from his conduct is purely caſual; and againſt all the evil I may ſuffer from his philoſophical Quixotiſm, I have no ſort of ſecurity, but the miſerable protection of laws which he abominates as ſhackles, and ſome lurking remains perhaps of common feeling which he ſtruggles to ſuppreſs as repugnant to his duty. A vicious man, in the ordinary courſe of things, is vicious only in particular points: he is ſatirical, or debauched, or proud, or revengeful; and while we avail ourſelves in ſome degree of his good qualities, we may guard againſt the bad: but with the votaries

ries of a Syſtem who think any means lawful in the purſuit of an end ſo abſtract that any measures may be thought to promote it, one knows not how to act. It is like dealing with inſanity, where innocence is mingled with miſchief: nor is it eaſy to conceive how ſocial intercourſe could be at all ſupported amidſt ſuch confuſion and diſtruſt.

This undiſtinguiſhing proſcription of all the received regulations of life, is not a remote conſequence, it is in the eſſence of the New Syſtem of Morals. The genius of Pagan mythology, it has been juſtly remarked, was naturally mild and indulgent, becauſe a reverence for any particular ſcheme of it was perfectly conſiſtent with a reſpect for any other; while that of Chriſtianity was neceſſarily intolerant, becauſe its validity is incompatible with any other mode of faith, and its eſtabliſhment preſuppoſes their extinction. It is juſt the ſame with the project before us. It has all the excluſive ſpirit of inſpired truth, with all the wretched impotence of brainſick error. It enjoins inflexibly, as the ſole legitimate principle of action, what is utterly inconſiſtent with every other principle of action whatſoever. For theſe it can have no toleration, no forbearance.

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It can only thrive on their decline: it can only triumph in their deſtruction. The moſt enthuſiaſtic admirers of any particular virtues, may entertain at leaſt a decent reſpect for the reſt. They are lawful potentates, each in his domain; and may well reign together. But the Syſtem before us aſpires at univerſal deſpotiſm: it is the Lord of moral nature, or it is nothing: and proſcribes with equal jealouſy allies and rivals. The ſpirit of the ſcheme muſt affect the mind of the votary. To a profeſſor of this Syſtem, all that has paſſed for wiſdom in the world can appear as nothing better than fooliſhneſs; and the moſt revered and ſacred principles in the government of life, as at beſt but rattles to amuſe the infancy of reaſon. How can it be otherwiſe? Take theſe principles in any of their forms—in the municipal laws of the country—in traditionary uſages—in the inſtitutions which enforce both—in the prevailing ſentiments on morality—and the received maxims which regulate ſocial intercourſe amongſt us. The eſtabliſhed rules on theſe ſubjects have not been promulged by philoſophers from the cloſet; nor faſhioned by the imagination, where all is ductile, into thoſe regular ſhapes which the mind of man delights to form and to contemplate. Still leſs have they been

been conſtructed on an abſtract view of their ultimate tendency to the general good. In many inſtances they are purely arbitrary, and derive all their value from their general recognition. In others, their reaſon, independently of their reception, is not always obviouſly clear. Some, and thoſe not the ſlighteſt in practical importance, may even appear in ſpeculation, and appear on that very account, irrational, irkſome, and oppreſſive. They have grown, for the moſt part, out of our common nature as influenced by our particular ſituation—that is, they have been the creatures of exigency: where they have not ſprung from the ſuggeſtions of our nature, they have in general been formed and matured, with the ſame imperfections in theory and advantage in practice, on an experience of its wants: and where neither nature nor reaſon can claim them as her offspring, where accident gave them being, and habit has retained them, they have at laſt acquired a value from adoption; they occupy a void till it is better ſupplied; and contribute, with the reſt, to the grand object of them all. This object, which is nothing more than the maintenance of the Syſtem of life on its preſent footing, is preciſely the very grievance that exaſperates the philoſophers of the new ſect;

and in the principles which thus promote this end, there are abundant provocatives to their ſcorn and indignation. They operate by ordinary motives: they propoſe but trivial ends: they are altogether ſilent about the general happineſs of ſentient nature. To minds heated by the project of promoting this happineſs on a new and improved principle, whatever tends to make us content with our preſent miſerable condition, can appear in no other guiſe than a vile abomination: the very circumſtance of its being adapted to its purpoſe, only irritates them the more; and all reſpect for ſuch deſpicable prejudices will be treated as nothing better than bondage to exploded error, and all enforcement of them by law, or by opinion, as an atrocious uſurpation on the ſovereignty of reaſon. Hatred when intenſely inflamed by the blaſt of zeal, is the fierceſt of the paſſions; nor muſt we be ſurpriſed at the unbroken conſtancy and infuriate ardour with which the projectors of univerſal happineſs have urged, and reſumed, and rallied, and preſſed their aſſault on theſe inveterate obſtacles. The accompliſhment of their ſcheme, depends on their deſtruction. Mr. Godwin has tried his hand at a few of them: at gratitude, (I think) friendſhip, patriotiſm, parental affection, filial piety

piety, confidence, fidelity, right of property, conjugal union—and ſome other of the antiquated follies of former days. We have ſeen what he has propoſed to ſubſtitute.

The taſte of theſe gentlemen is truly marvellous. Grant them all they wiſh. Give them their heart's content. Allow them to have formed a race of beings preciſely to their notions; diſciples who, by dint of long meditation and ſtout effort, had effectually ſubdued in themſelves every affection whatever; and who, on all occaſions, acted only for the general good. What ſort of characters would they form? Place them in imagination before you. Conceive of them as neighbours, fellow-citizens, aſſociates, friends. What ſhould we think of an animal in any of theſe ſhapes, or in the ſhape of man, whom no intimacy could endear, no kindneſs attach, no miſery move, no injuries provoke, no beauty charm, no wit exhilirate; whoſe cold heart no ſorrows could thaw, no feſtivity warm; but who purſued, with one fixed, ſteady, and inflexible deſign, ſome abſtract idea of the general good; dead to the glow of virtue; dead to the ſhame of vice; and calculating the degrees of rectitude, of poſthumous advantage over preſent ſuffering

fering, by De Moivre upon chances. Taſtes may differ: but to my perceptions it is difficult to figure any being more thoroughly hideous and diſguſtful; more diſqualified for the enjoyment or diffuſion of any kind of happineſs; or more ready to perpetrate what the human heart recoils at. Now, though we might not, as we certainly ſhould not, be able to attain in full perfection this unnatural and monſtrous perverſion of all ſentiment; though we ſhould never become, under this diſcipline, as perfectly wretched and deteſtable as it ſo anxiouſly labours to make us; though we ſhould never dive ſo deep in this ſlough of deſpond, as entirely to deaden all ſenſibility to every thing which can intereſt and engage the human heart, and engender a feveriſh zeal for an object ſo remote and abſtract that it baffles ſpeculation, we might render ourſelves, by unrelenting effort, as odious and miſerable as our conſtitutions would allow.

And for what?—For the general good? But general good, after all, is but an aggregate of individual good; and our capacity to ſuffer and enjoy remains preciſely as it was. Mr. Godwin furniſhes us with no ſixth ſenſe; he opens no new inlet to gratification; he diſcovers no

no *terra auſtralis* of delight, phyſical or moral, preſent or to come. All things ſtand exactly as they were; except, that inſtead of each man's providing for himſelf, he is to purvey for others; every body is to buſy himſelf in every body's buſineſs but his own; every body is to meddle in every thing but what he is competent to manage; all are to cater and none to conſume; and in the mortification, confuſion, perplexity, diſtruſt, and deſpair, of each individual, is to conſiſt univerſal confidence, peace, plenty, ſecurity, and happineſs.

Such is this project in full expanſion and luxuriance, "with all its bluſhing honours thick upon it." I am far from ſaying, I repeat it, that it is capable of all the miſchief I have ſtated. Few ſchemes, either of good or ill, fully anſwer the deſigns of the contriver, or the prognoſtications of the critic. All theory which has human manners for its object, is ſo liable to deflection from the very medium through which it acts, that it is extremely difficult to eſtimate its practical effects. Of all contrivances of this kind, however, that which bends its aim, like the preſent, at the ruling principles of human conduct, has the faireſt chance for ſucceſs. All other

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plans and inſtitutions deſigned to effect a change in the temper of mankind, operate indirectly: their proceſs is ſlow; the means circuitous; and the end, at laſt, but partial: *this* attacks at once the ſpring-head of action; and aſpires, by the only practicable method, at an entire regeneration of the human character. If it fails to attain its purpoſe moſt completely, it is no fault of the Syſtem: nor (for my own part) when I regard, even with the moſt indulgent eye, the ſtate of public manners and the public mind, can I fondly perſuade myſelf that we are fallen upon times ſo good, ſo full of a high ſenſe of perſonal dignity in the individual, and an exquiſite reſpect for the cultivated feelings of others; ſo alive to true glory and true ſhame; ſo noble ſpirited, ſo gallant, ſo ſuſceptible; ſo grounded in an incorruptible integrity ſublimed into honour, and accompliſhed in a generous courteſy exalted into worth, as to render an attempt to ſhed a deadly palſy on the vital principle that feeds theſe ſentiments, a matter of abſolute indifference. It is no difficult atchievement to precipitate the falling. But this is to myſelf.

Surely, my dear Friend, it is ſcarcely poſſible to avoid ſeeing, that the original ſin of the whole theory

theory of morals which places virtue in utility, and which leads in its certain iſſue to all theſe ſhameful conſequences, conſiſts in conſidering as the reſult of reaſon, an effect which it is not in the competence of reaſon to produce. Mr. Godwin has laid down this fundamental error very diſtinctly. "To a rational being," ſays he, treating of the foundation of virtue,* "there can be but one rule of conduct, Juſtice; and one mode of aſcertaining that rule, the exerciſe of his underſtanding." On this ſcheme of morality, every thing, you ſee, is made dependent upon reaſon. But our moral ſentiments cannot be the reſult of reaſon. The object of reaſon is, ſimply and excluſively, truth and falſehood: and all the effect which truth or falſehood can poſſibly produce upon the mind, is to excite a mere aſſent or diſſent as any propoſition appears under one or other of theſe characters. Wherever the mind is affected on any occaſion beyond this, we may univerſally affirm, and be perfectly ſure, that this effect proceeds from ſome cauſe entirely independent of the powers of reaſon. Whatever is ſuſceptible of truth or falſehood is within the province of reaſon. Reaſon may inveſtigate the properties in any object by which theſe affections

* See Pol. Juſ. B. 2, c. 6.

ſections are produced, the relations of theſe properties with other parts of the Syſtem in which they act, or the effects they are deſigned to produce upon that Syſtem: but thoſe properties muſt previouſly have acted, to become a ſubject matter of enquiry; and muſt ſtill continue to act, independently of any ſpeculations reſpecting their nature, their relations, or their ultimate deſtination. Reaſon may be employed on ſubjects affecting the mind with any emotion, as well as upon lines and figures: but its effects, as reaſon, muſt in both caſes be the ſame. It may explore the cauſes of beauty in viſible objects, or of harmony in ſound, juſt as well as the moſt abſtract relations of a triangle: truth and falſehood, probable or certain, are ſtill its only concern; and unleſs beauty and harmony previouſly and independently delighted, the reſult upon the mind would be equally unintereſting. It may treat of principles of action in man, juſt as well as of *vis inertiæ* in matter: but, as incapable of affecting the mind in any other way than through the agency of objects which previouſly affected it, it can never operate as an original principle of action itſelf; though, by being frequently converſant with ſuch powers, it may ſometimes, by a natural deluſion, ſeem to do ſo.

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This remark, you perceive, is of extenſive application. The ſubject before us muſt limit our preſent uſe of it. Our moral ſentiments are original principles of action; and cannot therefore, as ſuch, be derived from reaſon. We do not merely *believe* an action to be of a certain deſcription called moral or immoral; we *approve* or *diſapprove* it as ſuch; and this ſentiment of approbation and diſapprobation has a poſitive influence on human conduct. But approbation and diſapprobation are emotions of the mind; and cannot, therefore originate from reaſon. We may obſerve accordingly that Mr. Hume, who has laboured very aſſiduouſly to refer morality altogether to reaſon, has been obliged to reſort at laſt to "a ſentiment of humanity implanted in our nature," to a feeling entirely underived from reaſon, to account for the only principle which ſets it in action, and without which it would be nothing more than an empty ſpeculation and dead letter. No reaſoning on the tendency to augment or diminiſh the general happineſs, in which he (with others) eſtabliſhes the ſtandard of right and wrong, could give origin to this feeling. Reaſon no doubt, by ſhewing that any action had one or other of theſe tendencies, might induce me to call it by one or other of theſe denominations, as I ſhould

name a Kangaroo a quadrupede, and a Penguin a bird, from their falling under one or other of theſe claſſes—but, unleſs I was previouſly ſo intereſted in the general happineſs, as to approve whatever promoted, and blame whatever obſtructed that end, reaſon could no more excite theſe emotions from ſuch tendencies, than Euclid could inflame me with love for a triangle, or averſion to a circle, from the remoteſt of their geometrical relations. The very theory which places virtue in utility, preſumes on a general affection for the general good (which is the end of utility) or it would not otherwiſe be of power to delude the public for a moment. If Mr. Godwin, who has diſcreetly paſſed over this high matter in ſilence, relying on an internal ſentiment thus exiſting in his favour, if Mr. Godwin can ſhew me any reaſon, not founded on perſonal intereſt, or a feeling independent of all argument, why I ſhould prefer the production of good to the production of evil—*erit mihi magnus Apollo*; and I will ſubſcribe to his dogmas as oracles tomorrow.

Holding this to be utterly impoſſible; and aſſuming that our moral ſentiments, as original principles of action, operating through an affection of the mind, muſt proceed from ſome cauſe

cauſe diſtinct from reaſon, and adapted to that effect, where, let me aſk, are we to look for this cauſe, but in the immediate objects *in* which and *on* which it acts, in the qualities which ſtrike us as moral or immoral, and in the acknowledged properties of the human mind. To deduce theſe ſentiments from a general ſentiment (for to ſome ſentiment we muſt at laſt recur) in favour of their ultimate end, is perfectly prepoſterous. The greater part of our moral ſentiments are not reſolvable into any ſuch ſentiment at all, general or particular; and of thoſe which ſeem ſo, the particular muſt have conducted to the general ſentiment and cannot be derived from it. We might as well affirm that particular objects ſtruck us as beautiful, from a reference to ſome abſtract idea of univerſal beauty, as that particular acts of beneficence excited our approbation, from our general approbation of beneficence. Particular objects muſt have ſtruck us as beautiful, before we had aſcertained the general properties in which beauty conſiſts: particular actions muſt have excited our approbation as beneficent, before we had formed a notion of beneficence in the abſtract.

If you aſk me, after this, from whence I derive our moral ſentiments, in what I place the efficient

efficient cauſe of moral diſtinction, I do not heſi tate to refer you to the account of theſe ſentiments by Adam Smith; not as adopting all his inferences with unqualified aſſent, nor as ſuppoſing that he has exhauſted a ſubject productive in its nature to the power of the ſearcher, but from a firm and rooted conviction that he has opened and explored the only quarry from which any ſolid concluſion on the ſubject will ever be deduced. Paſſing over all ſpeculations on the relative properties or ultimate tendency of moral qualities as totally incompetent to *form* ſuch impreſſions, and diſdaining the clumſy artifice of a moral ſenſe peculiarly adapted to *receive* them, he has looked for our moral ſentiments in the acknowledged properties of the objects we regard as moral or immoral, acting on the acknowledged properties of the mind of man—and he has found them there. His ſolution, as far as I know, has never been conteſted; and if its effect has not been adequate to its merits, it is imputable to our being but little intereſted in the origin of principles which operate independently of all our ſpeculations about them. We conſider ſuch enquiries as at beſt but matters of curious reſearch. Burke who with far greater powers has explored an analogous ſubject, and developed the origin of our ideas of the ſublime and beautiful

tiful, has perhaps been ſtill leſs efficacious. The object of theſe writers has been, not preſumptuouſly to ſtart plans of their own, but ſoberly to inveſtigate the proceſſes of nature: and it is not till we are ſtaggered, perplexed, and diſguſted, by phantaſtic theories ſpun out of falſe principles, that we reſort with a genuine reliſh to the true. If you ſhould read the work I have quoted, after the peruſal of this letter, you will feel, I think, the full force of this obſervation.

Nothing can be better founded than the principle of the theory there ſtated, or more natural and ſatisfactory than the ſolution it affords. It places the grounds of our moral approbation and our blame, not in the *conſequences* of actions, which we rarely regard, and which it is an effort to purſue, but in the *ſentiments* and *paſſions* from whence they ſpring, which touch us by an involuntary ſympathy, and find an echo in every breaſt.—We enter into the feelings of thoſe around us—without this, their conduct could affect us no otherwiſe than if they were mere automata. We enter thus into their feelings, becauſe, as ſuſceptible of the ſame impreſſions ourſelves, the occaſion immediately ſuggeſts how we ſhould feel ſo circumſtanced. *Non ignara mali, miſeris ſuccurrere diſco*, is the language of poetry and truth,

and

and applicable to every ſympathy as well as to compaſſion. When the feelings of others are found, on this ſuggeſtion, in concord with our own, they touch us with delight, and excite our approbation: when otherwiſe, they affect us with diſguſt, and provoke our cenſure. Had we been ſo conſtructed, accordingly, as to feel for others as they feel for themſelves, our approbation would have been indiſcriminate; all conduct would have affected us alike; and no ſuch conſequence as moral diſtinction could poſſibly have reſulted. As we are naturally diſpoſed however, to enter into ſome affections and paſſions more readily than into others—into thoſe which directly act upon the mind, as joy or grief, than thoſe which reſult from ſome phyſical diſpoſition of the body, as hunger or deſire—into thoſe which are common to all ages and temperaments as emulation, than thoſe which are peculiar to ſome, as love—into thoſe which generate others congenial to themſelves, as gratitude, than thoſe which generate the reverſe, as reſentment—and into none, unleſs we are equally acted upon by the ſame common cauſe, in a degree equal to that of the perſon principally affected—ſo, to procure that perfect ſympathy which conciliates approbation, two different efforts are required, giving riſe to two different

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ſets of virtues, eſtimable and valuable (like every thing elſe) according to the delight they afford, and the difficulty of their attainment: 1ſt. that of the ſpectator, to enter into the feelings of the perſon principally affected, from whence we derive all the amiable virtues which turn on ſenſibility; and 2dly. that of the perſon principally concerned, to reduce his feelings to the ſtandard of the ſpectator's ſympathy, from whence originate all the reſpectable virtues which turn on ſelf-command: into which two deſcriptions of virtue, thus modifying the original paſſions of our nature, ſubmitting the more ſelfiſh to the more enlarged, reſtraining the unſocial, and ſtimulating the benevolent, whatever has obtained amongſt mankind the praiſe of virtue is reſolvable; and in reference to which we approve or condemn whatever is the object of moral ſentiment.

On this theory all is regular, conſiſtent, harmonious; in perfect concord with our feelings and experience; and of a piece with the general œconomy of nature. It comes home to the boſoms of us all. We are not left, under this ſcheme, to conſume life in groping our way through it; as much agaze at its moſt ordinary duties as at its higheſt functions; the ſport of every

every guſt; without any other direction than caprice, without any other impulſe than fanaticiſm. Our appetites and paſſions ſtand as the true original principles of action; each poſſeſſing, like the correſpondent powers in phyſical nature, a certain determinate deſtination, which would be miſſed, and to a loſs incalculable, in the ſuſpenſion even of the meaneſt of them. As not poſſeſſing, however, like thoſe powers, a certain determinate force, nor acting on the ſame unchangeable ſubſtance; but varying in different tempers and conditions, and operating on all the varieties of life and ſociety, our moral ſentiments ariſe, a part of our nature too, to check, to urge, and to regulate their impulſe. While paramount to theſe, and arbiter of all, preſides the underſtanding; enabling us by a wider ſurvey of theſe principles, in their cauſes and their conſequences, to rectify our own conduct; and, by a judicious application of them, to ameliorate the human character.

But I have already tranſgreſſed the limits of my ſubject, and haſten to ſubſcribe myſelf, &c. &c.